

THE ROLE OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN DEVELOPING
COMMUNICATION CONFLICT RESOLVING SKILLS AMONG
SELECTED NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS
IN PAKISTAN

SADIA DEEP

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I dedicate this thesis to my dearest parents, husband Muhammad Zahid Abbas and
brother Amer Rizwan (Late)



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ABSTRACT

Communication conflicts among employees of the developing organisations in Pakistan have been one of the major issues over the years. The causes are numerous but the efforts to reduce and resolve these conflicts effectively are found to be rare. The objectives of this case study were to examine the nature of communication conflicts predominant among employees at the workplace, explore the role of culture in communication conflicts, identify the perceptions of employees of in-house training using Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach and finally propose a PBL-based training module for developing conflict resolving skills among employees at the work place in Pakistan. This study adopted a Case Study approach. Using purposeful sampling, it involved forty Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) employees from different parts of Pakistan. The data emerged from three instruments involving semi-structured interviews, surveys and observations to examine the nature of communication conflicts among employees and see the impact of PBL training on the soft skills of respondents. Interview and observation data were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis while the data from the survey was computed through descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings from this study show the existence of different type of communication conflicts among employees in the developing organisations. The result shows the substantial role of PBL in developing conflict resolving skills and other essential soft skills among employees as a whole. The finding concludes that PBL plays an instrumental and effective role towards improving the various soft skills and traits including among employees of an NGO sector.

ABSTRAK

Konflik komunikasi dalam kalangan pekerja dalam organisasi yang sedang membangun di Pakistan menjadi salah satu isu besar sejak beberapa tahun kebelakangan. Banyak punca yang dapat dikenalpasti tetapi usaha-usaha untuk mengurangkan dan menyelesaikan konflik komunikasi ini didapati amat kurang. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidik kewujudan konflik komunikasi dalam kalangan pekerja di tempat kerja, mengenalpasti peranan budaya dalam mencetuskan konflik komunikasi, mengenalpasti persepsi para pekerja terhadap pendekatan Pembelajaran Berasaskan Masalah (Problem-Based Learning - PBL) dalam latihan peringkat dalaman yang dijalankan dan akhir sekali mencadangkan modul latihan berasaskan PBL bagi membangunkan kemahiran menyelesaikan konflik komunikasi dalam kalangan pekerja di tempat kerja di Pakistan. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan Kajian Kes. Dengan menggunakan kaedah pensampelan bertujuan, kajian ini melibatkan seramai empat puluh pekerja Badan Bukan Kerajaan (NGO) dari pelbagai wilayah di Pakistan. Data diperolehi menggunakan tiga instrumen yang melibatkan sesi temubual separa berstruktur, borang soal selidik dan pemerhatian bagi mengkaji bentuk konflik komunikasi antara pekerja dan melihat kesan latihan menggunakan kaedah PBL terhadap kemahiran insaniah para responden. Data temubual dan pemerhatian ditranskrip dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik manakala data soal selidik dianalisis secara statistik deskriptif menggunakan aplikasi Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Dapatan daripada kajian ini menunjukkan wujud pelbagai jenis konflik komunikasi dalam kalangan pekerja dalam organisasi berkaitan. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa pendekatan PBL secara keseluruhannya memainkan peranan yang besar dalam meningkatkan kemahiran penyelesaian konflik komunikasi dan kemahiran-kemahiran insaniah yang lain dalam kalangan pekerja. Dapatan kajian ini secara keseluruhannya menunjukkan bahawa pendekatan PBL memainkan peranan yang besar dan berkesan ke arah menambahbaik pelbagai kemahiran insaniah dan proses pembentukan karakter para pekerja dalam sektor NGO.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
ABSTRACT	v
ABSTRAK	vi
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	xvii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Research Background	1
1.2 Non-governmental Organisations in Pakistan	10
1.2.1 Training and Consultancy Firm	11
1.2.2 Community Motivation Development Organization	11
1.2.3 Read Foundation	12
1.2.4 International Catholic Migration Commission	12
1.3 Problem Statement	12
1.4 Objectives of Study	16
1.5 Research Questions	16
1.6 Research Scope	17
1.7 Significance of the Study	18
1.8 Operational Definition of Terms	19
1.8.1 Communication Conflicts	19
1.8.2 Workplace	20
1.8.3 Employees	20

1.8.4	Soft skills	20
1.8.5	Problem-Based Learning	21
1.8.6	Culture	21
1.8.7	Non-Governmental Organizations	21
1.9	Thesis Outline	22
1.10	Summary	22
CHAPTER 2	LITERATURE REVIEW	23
2.1	Introduction	23
2.2	Phenomenon of Communication Conflicts	25
2.2.1	Communication	25
2.2.2	Communication Conflicts	27
2.2.3	Communication Conflict Costs	29
2.2.4	Functional Outcomes	30
2.2.5	Dysfunctional Outcomes	31
2.3	Causes of Communication Conflicts	31
2.3.1	Poor Communication Skills	31
2.3.2	Different Values and Interests	32
2.3.3	Scarce Resources	32
2.3.4	Personality Clashes	33
2.3.5	Poor Performance	33
2.3.6	Discriminatory Practices	33
2.3.7	Absence of Soft Skills in Employees	33
2.3.8	Cultural Differences	34
2.4	Culture Differences and Communication Conflicts	34
2.5	Types of Communication Conflicts	36
2.5.1	Intrapersonal Conflicts	36
2.5.2	Interpersonal Conflicts	36
2.5.3	Intragroup Conflicts	37
2.5.4	Intergroup Conflicts	37
2.5.5	Task Conflicts	37
2.5.6	Relationship Conflicts	38
2.5.7	Process Conflicts	38
2.6	Addressing a Communication Conflict	39

2.7	Problem-Based Learning Development	41
2.7.1	What is Problem-Based Learning?	41
2.8	Philosophical Foundation of Problem-Based Learning	44
2.8.1	Theory of Progressive	44
2.8.2	Social Constructivist Theory	45
2.8.3	Cognitive Development Theory	46
2.9	PBL Learning Models	47
2.9.1	McMaster University Model	48
2.9.2	Aalborg Model	48
2.9.3	Republic Polytechnic Model	49
2.9.4	PBL Model at UTHM Malaysia	50
2.10	Core Features of PBL Approach	55
2.10.1	Students responsible for their own learning	55
2.10.2	The problem ill-structured stimulate free inquiry	55
2.10.3	Learning integrated from various disciplines	56
2.10.4	Collaboration is Imperative	56
2.10.5	Application to the problem resolution	56
2.10.6	Analysis of learned concepts and principles	56
2.10.7	Self and Peer Assessment	57
2.10.8	The valued activities in the real world	57
2.10.9	Measurement towards the goals of problem-based learning	57
2.11	Main Components of Problem Based Learning	58
2.11.1	Problem Based on Real World	58
2.12	PBL versus Traditional Approach	63
2.13	Soft Skills	66
2.13.1	Demand of Industry	66
2.14	PBL and Soft skills	68
2.15	PBL as a Training Approach	70
2.16	Related Research Studies	73
2.17	Conceptual Framework of the Study	79
2.18	Summary	82

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 83

3.1	Introduction	83
3.2	Research Method and Design	83
3.2.1	A Case Study Approach	84
3.2.2	Explanatory Case Study	84
3.2.3	A Single Case Study	85
3.3	Selection of Respondents	87
3.3.1	Respondents	89
3.3.2	Demographics of Quantitative Data	89
3.3.3	Sampling Techniques	91
3.4	Research Procedure	91
3.5	Training Model & Process	96
3.6	Pilot Study	102
3.7	Data Collection Tools and Data Analysis	105
3.7.1	Questionnaire for Survey	105
3.7.2	Semi-Structured Interview	106
3.7.3	Observation	108
3.8	Triangulation of data	109
3.9	Module Development	110
3.10	Trustworthiness of the Study	112
3.11	Ethical Consideration	116
3.12	Summary	116
CHAPTER 4	FINDINGS	117
4.1	Introduction	117
4.2	Results from Survey	117
4.3	Findings from Interviews	119
4.4	Nature of Communication Conflicts	120
4.4.1	Intragroup and Intergroup Conflict	121
4.4.2	Task Conflicts	122
4.4.3	Relationship Conflicts	124
4.4.4	Process Conflict	125
4.5	Potential Causes of Communication Conflicts	127
4.5.1	Common Causes	127
4.5.2	Rare Causes	128

4.5.3	Most Harmful Outcomes	129
4.5.4	Less Harmful Outcomes	129
4.6	Effective Resolution of Conflicts	130
4.7	Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts	132
4.7.1	Culture as a Whole	132
4.7.2	Language	133
4.7.3	Traditions and Values	134
4.7.4	Geography	135
4.8	PBL in Culture based Communication Conflicts	136
4.9	Role of PBL in Conflict Resolving Skills	138
4.10	Role of PBL in other Soft Skills	140
4.11	The PBL-based training Module	141
4.11.1	Training Duration	142
4.11.2	Satisfaction	143
4.11.3	Suggestions	143
4.12	Data Findings from Observation	144
4.12.1	Communication Skills	146
4.12.2	Conflict Resolution Skills & Traits	147
4.12.3	Teamwork Skills	147
4.12.4	Research Skills	147
4.12.5	Culture Diversity	148
4.12.6	Training Resources & Environment	149
4.12.7	Training Module	150
4.13	Findings from Survey	150
4.14	Empirically-based Patterns	156
4.15	Findings from the Triangulation of Data	163
CHAPTER 5	DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS	165
5.1	Introduction	165
5.2	Discussion	165
5.2.1	Types of Communication Conflicts	165
5.2.2	Culture-based Communication Conflicts	167
5.2.3	PBL in Resolving Communication Conflicts	168
5.2.4	Training Module	169

5.3	Conclusion of the Study	170
5.4	Contribution of the Study	171
5.5	Practical Implications	172
5.6	Theoretical Implications	173
5.7	Limitations of the Study	174
5.8	Recommendation of the Study	175
	REFERENCES	177
	APPENDICES	202
	VITAE	



PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU TUN AMINAH

LIST OF TABLES

2.1	PBL Models	47
2.2	Analysis of Research Studies	77
3.1	Gender Cross Tabulation	89
3.2	Work Experience and Management level	90
3.3	Demographics of Qualitative Data	90
3.4	Prepositions	92
3.5	Sample for Pilot Study	103
3.6	Result of Pilot Study	104
3.7	Result from the main study	104
3.8	Detail of Observation Activity	108
3.9	Different PBL Modules	111
3.10	Data validation through Inter-rater	113
3.11	Calculation of percent agreement	114
4.1	Survey of Communication Conflicts	118
4.2	Standard value of mean score	150
4.3	Communication Skills	151
4.4	Conflict Resolution Skills	152
4.5	Conflict Resolution Traits	153
4.6	Teamwork Skills	154
4.7	Research Skills	155
4.8	Triangulation of data findings	163

LIST OF FIGURES

2.1	Structured Literature Review	24
2.2	Republic Polytechnic PBL Model	50
2.3	PBL LADDER 1	51
2.4	PBL LADDER 2	52
2.5	PBL LADDER 3	52
2.6	PBL LADDER 4	53
2.7	PBL LADDER 5	54
2.8	Comparison of traditional and PBL Approach	63
2.9	Training Approach of PBL	72
2.10	Training Process and expected outcomes	79
2.11	Conceptual Framework	80
3.1	The case presentation	85
3.2	The selection of sample	88
3.3	Research Procedures	93
3.4	Pattern Matching Process	95
3.5	Five ladders of PBL adapted from Othman and Salleh	97
3.6	Trainees worked on problem through FILA	98
3.7	Participant working on given problem	99
3.8	Participants having discussion	100
3.9	Participant presenting the solution of the problem	101
3.10	Participant doing assessment exercises	102
3.11	Triangulation of data	110
3.12	Development of Training Module	111
4.1	Flow of findings on Objective 1	157
4.2	Flow of findings on Objective 2	159
4.3	Flow of findings on Objective 3	160
4.4	Flow of findings on Objective 4	162

LIST OF APPENDICES

A	Survey on Existence and Nature of Communication Conflict at the Workplace in Pakistan	202
B	Semi-Structured Interview	205
C	Skill Assessment of Training Based on PBL Approach	208
D	Email to the Heads of NGOs	215
E	Training Schedule	218
F	Observation Form	220
G	PBL Training Module for Employees Professional Development	221
H	Participant Consent Form	248
I	Validation of Interview Data	250
J	Validation of Observation Data	288
K	Data Validation by Respondents	319
L	Curriculum Vitae	321

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

F2F	-	Face to Face
5 LAL		Five Ladders of Active Learning
CCTST	-	California Critical Thinking Skills Test
CMDO	-	Communality Motivation & Development Organization
CRS	-	Conflict Resolution Skills
CRT	-	Conflict Resolution Traits
CS	-	Communication Skills
ICMC	-	International Catholic Migration Commission
MMA	-	Mixed Method Approach
PBL	-	Problem-Based Learning
RP	-	Republic Polytechnic
RS	-	Research Skills
RSDO	-	Research Skills & Development Organization
TW	-	Teamwork Skills
UK	-	United Kingdom
US	-	United States

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

JOURNAL PAPERS

1. Sadia Deep, Berhannudin Mohd Salleh, Hussain Othman, (2016). Exploring the Role of Problem-Based Learning in Developing Conflict Resolving and other Soft Skills is published in International Review for Marketing & Management. (ISSN 2146-4405) Volume 6, No. 4, October 2016
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1. Sadia Deep, Berhannudin Mohd Salleh & Hussain Othman (April 12-13, 2016). “The Study on Use of Problem-based learning Towards Improving Soft skills of Undergraduate Students in the English Language Class” Proceeding in 1st International Research Conference on Economics Business and Social Sciences (IRC), Penang Malaysia.
2. Sadia Deep, Berhannudin Mohd Salleh & Hussain Othman (7-8 March 2016). “The Electronic Problem-based learning Approach towards Developing Soft Skills” Proceeding of 11th International Conference on Management, Business, Economics, Social Sciences and Humanities Research, Langkawi Malaysia.
3. Attended faculty training on Problem-based learning delivered by Dr. Berhannudin Mohd Salleh (September 2014)
4. Attended faculty training on PO Problem-based learning (POPBL) delivered by Dr. Hussain Othman and Dr. Berhannudin Mohd Salleh (June 2016)
5. Received Master Training Program on Problem-based learning level 2 in AKEPT, Malaysia (November 2014).
6. Received Master Training Program on Problem-based learning level 3 in AKEPT, Malaysia (March 2015). Attended symposium on “My PBL” (August 2016) in AKEPT
7. Co-facilitated the training of Master Trainers belonging to faculties of different Universities of Malaysia on PO Problem-based learning (POPBL) delivered by Dr. Hussain Othman and Dr. Berhannudin Mohd Salleh (July 2017)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

There have been dramatic changes in the workplace globally over the years. The corresponding dynamic workplace demands employees to acquire diverse skills in order to fit in the competitive work environment of an organisation. Employees have to interact with the institutions of public and private's employees in order to promote the goals of their organisation (Kakepoto, Said, Habil, & Umrani, 2013). In the state of affairs, communication conflict, being a normal part of human interaction, is even easier to occur to a greater extent.

The conflicts can be envisaged at multiple levels including perceptive, behavioral and emotional dimensions among employees. Discrimination, segregation, and exclusion can be involved in a conflict. It is the manner of handling differences that either diminish or provokes a situation irrespective of the root of the problem. Tolerance and patience are key factors in conflict resolution. Only then, true understanding and appreciation of how workplace cultures are unique can be comprehended properly, and only then respect and tolerance can be built in the face of differences (Fry & Bjorkqvist, 2013).

If looked upon the nature and history of communication conflicts, it is known that communication conflicts are as ancient as a human being as they exist since the existence of very first human beings. The description of Abel and Cain (sons of Adam) story in the Holy Quran and as well as in the Bible and Torah truly depicts

the dialogue of communication conflict initiated to realize a mutual interest which eventually ended in the death of Abel (Al-Quran, Al-Maida, 5:28- 29). Hence, from time immemorial till date, human beings are entangled in communication conflicts from top to toe which includes family - the most sacred institution, different tribes, religious groups, political groups, society, and workplace and so on. Deep analysis of the concept reveals that the phenomenon is quite natural and instinctive (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Being destructive at most of the time, several types of research have been conducted and several conflict resolution modules and strategies were developed in order to tackle communication conflicts (Roscigno, Hodson, & Lopez, 2009; Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2007). As far as resolution and management of communication conflicts is concerned, numerous studies have been performed on the corresponding resolving strategies to help manage and reduce conflicts and minimize its losses but conflicts seem to be still rampant in daily lives especially in workplaces (Lewin, et al., 2016; Ballian, et al., 2016; Doucet, Poitras, & Chênevert, 2009).

Since people hailing from diverse cultural background have to interact at the workplace for an extended period of time with regard to their mutual responsibilities, assignment, and interests, communication conflicts tend to occur at the workplace (Morse, 2016). Hence, in today's complex workplace and due to the dynamic nature of human being, communication conflict is a common and inevitable phenomenon. While pursuing the essential aspects of communication conflict, the researcher came across the Conrad definition. The conflict involves the interaction of two or more people having mutual goals who perceive each other as interference in achieving those goals. All conflicts have one thing in common — they are made up of communication (Conrad, 1994). According to Conrad (1994), communication, irrespective of its type, is pivotal in managing and resolving conflicts. Therefore, the term communication conflict is used to refer to a conflict among employees at the workplace in this study.

Communication Conflict is a natural result of the interaction of two or more individuals, groups, and organisations that come into contact to achieve mutual interests and goals. However, when two or more of them desire and compete for similar and limited resources in an unethical manner, then the relationship between these entities may become sore and inconsistent. This incompatible situation thus leads to different types of communication conflicts among employees at the

workplace. Conflict stays in intergroup and intragroup relations (Afaq, 2016), interpersonal relations (Frone, 2000; Ledlow, 2009), strategic decision-making (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter, & Harrison, 1995; G. N. Powell & Greenhaus, 2006) and other organisational circles.

Conflict results in the destruction of communication between employees who break their personal and professional relationships. Moreover, it affects effectiveness and performance of activities because the tension produced by conflict distracts the employees and team members from performing their task (Gil et al., 2005). Communication conflict at workplace also poses serious threats to employees' well-being and productivity.

Today's managers and employees always consider conflicts as something to be avoided or hidden as much as possible and totally view them negatively (Greer & Jehn, 2007). The outcomes of communication conflict, however, may not always be destructive and harmful to employees and organisation. Indeed, researchers suggest that employees' performance has improved through constructive conflicts. Creativity, innovation, performance, quality of decisions and communication between members of the group can be reduced through suppressing and avoiding conflicts (O'Neill et al., 2017; Tjosvold, Wong, & Feng Chen, 2014). However, conflict is mostly viewed as destructive and its constructive perspective is mostly overlooked in its managing and resolution strategies.

The review of studies shows that communication conflicts have not been and cannot be stopped from occurring altogether but it is a well-known fact that if these conflicts erupt, they can be avoided, controlled and resolved and managed effectively and constructively in order to prevent them from further inflicting the whole organization or they can be directed towards positive development among employees of an organization (Katz & Flynn, 2013; Seren & Ustun, 2008). In an organisational life, the conflict was found to be an unavoidable phenomenon that contributes to or distract from organisational performance depending on the conflict management and resolving methods adopted in the workplace. In the business environment of today, workplace conflict has been a significant issue. Research in the conflict resolving domain says that conflict is on the rise at the workplace and will continue to go up; however, in order to manage and resolve these, many leaders and managers are not fully aware of processes and structures available (Katz & Flynn, 2013; Rahim, 2010).

Regarding types of communication conflicts, a literature review reveals four main types of communication conflicts i.e. intrapersonal, interpersonal-intergroup and intra-group communication conflicts at the workplace (Day, 2015; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001) while another conflict is based on nature, which is a task and relationship conflict. Task conflicts involving the assignment/task as the basis of conflict, are associated with effective teamwork whereas relationship conflicts mainly erupt because of personal reasons and are associated with poor teamwork. However, these two types of conflict were revealed to be highly correlated. For instance, task conflicts often lead to relationship conflicts (Birdi, 2005). There are multiple causes of communication conflicts in the workplace such as poor communication, ineffective leadership, unhealthy competition, and lack of resources (Othman, Mohd Salleh, & Abdullah, 2013).

Ahmed (2015) discusses several potential causes of these communications conflicts. One of the main causes of conflict between employees at the workplace is poor communication or lack of communication. This can result in failure to communicate or differences in communication styles. For example, a manager who gives an assignment to two employees but fails to communicate properly with them can create a rift between the employees which can further result into a source of animosity among the two employees and the manager. Besides that, employees can make incorrect assumptions, breeding workplace gossip and failing to communicate at the workplace (Ahmed, 2015). Lack of or poor communication not only decreases productivity but also the morale of employees at the workplace. Moreover, both informal and formal communication have all been potential sources for creating conflicts at the workplace and these conflicts could be reduced and controlled through proper strategies and planning (Nwogbaga, et al., 2015).

In addition, another cause of workplace conflict is the difference in personalities among employees. In shaping the personalities of employees, the different experiences and backgrounds of employees play an important role. Problems arise in the workplace when employees fail to accept the differences and understand each other's personalities. An employee with a straightforward personality may speak whatever he or she has in his or her mind at an inappropriate time, but that may offend a co-worker that does not have the same type of personality and may view this behaviour as rude.

Being under emotional and mental pressure is considered as a phenomenon of stress. When employees feel unable to cope with this pressure, then this stressful situation turns into stress. Different ways of reacting to stress actually create conflicts among employees considering the fact that a situation that motivates one person may be stressful to another. The employees' feelings, thinking, behaving and how their body works can be affected by stress. In fact, sleeping problem, sweating, loss of appetite and difficulty in concentrating at work are included as the common signs of stress. Therefore, this situation causes rifts among employer relationship and communication conflicts among employees. Sexual harassment may happen to employees at the workplace. Some types of behaviors that can be considered sexual harassment include verbal or physical conduct that is sexual in nature and request for sexual favors. However, laws of a country can implement certain "code of conduct" or nature of behaviour that is not considered to be a form of sexual harassment. If there is no proper code of conduct at workplace then it causes communication conflict in an organisation (Abiodun, 2014; Ahmed, 2015).

Communication conflicts also occur in organisations as a result of competition for supremacy, scarcity of common resources, leadership style. Communication conflict can lead to low productivity or service delivery if it is not managed in a timely manner. Research also indicates that conflict, if well managed, can sometimes produce a positive result. Not all conflicts have damaging effects. Force or intimidation should never be used to resolve a conflict, and early attention to the conflicting employees and negotiation between parties involved in the conflict should be adopted in resolving the conflict (Abiodun, 2014). The effects of conflict can be positive and negative within an organisation although conflict often has a negative connotation (Brookins, 2002).

On the negative note, there have been extremely negative repercussions of communication conflicts on the productivity, morale, self-esteem and entire personality of employees (Othman, 2013). Ensuring and maintaining the quality of education has a significant relationship with a conflict. Conflicts are helpful in improving the quality of education if they remain positive and are managed effectively (Mukhtar, Islam, & Siengthai, 2013). Communication conflicts usually cause stress in working environment resulting into absenteeism, high turnover rate, low productivity that could halt organisational work altogether (Goff, et al., 1990).

The negative repercussion can be devastating for both the employees and organisation. Increasingly frustrated with the level of conflict within an organisation, the organisation members may decide to end their membership. When the members are the heads of committees or part of the executive board, then it can prove to be extremely detrimental. The organisation has to recruit acting board members and appoint new members once the members begin to leave. In extreme cases, if executive board members step down, then the probability of dissolving the organisation takes place. Another great loss for an organisation is to lose donors, money, and access to essential resources while spending time on dealing with conflicts. The employees no more focus on achieving the core goals but they rather vent their frustrations and gossip due to conflict.

The members can become frustrated with the communication conflicts within an organisation if they find no solution or if they feel that their point of views goes unrecognised. As a result, members become stressful affecting their personal and professional lives adversely. Organisation members may have mental health problems like overeating, headaches, sleeping, loss of appetite or they become unapproachable. Intense and damaging situations may arise between organisation members if the conflict escalates without mediation. Organisational conflicts may transform into violence among employees that can further result in legal problems for the organisation and employees as well (Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 2017).

After the adverse impact of conflict, the causes of communication conflict are discussed again to proceed further with the topic. Apart from the mentioned causes, research indicates that one of the significant causes is the lack of generic skills (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Quek, 2005) including conflict resolution and collaboration skills among employees at the workplace which creates all these causes. For a long time, there have been organisational efforts through a myriad of training workshops and strategies, to develop generic/soft skills in employees of all level (Brown, 2001; Erven, 2006; Wentland, 2003). But as mentioned earlier, some school of thoughts views conflict as an opportunity in order to find creative solutions to problems. These schools view conflict as a source for brainstorming in employees while examining problems from various perspectives. Moreover, in a conflicting situation, different employees could be brought together to understand each

member's preferred communication style and exchange each other's opinions on topics relevant to the organisations growth and resolution of conflict (Ahmed, 2015).

The role of culture also cannot be ignored in triggering and resolving the conflict. Conflict and culture are indistinguishably linked. However, this does not mean that cultural differences inevitably produce conflict. When problems arise between or within cultures, it is often a response to difficulties in dealing with differences. The difference is often a source of fear and misunderstanding and it can pertain to religious, racial, political, economic and social matters (Daming & Hongzeng, 2002). Several approaches have been taken to modelling how culture influences the ways individuals negotiate interpersonal conflict. Most common has been the approach of searching for stable value-orientations, cultural traits-general predicting a range of traditionally distinctive conflict resolution behaviors. Researchers have increasingly adopted a constructivist approach to locating the connection of cultural influence in the knowledge structures that guide negotiators' judgments and decisions (Leung & Morris, 2015).

The role of culture has always been there in creating workplace conflict. Although there are comparative and contextual studies on culture-based conflicts (Paletz, Miron-Spektor, & Lin, 2014), empirical studies on the role of culture in accelerating are rarely found. Similarly, the strategies in existing literature to reduce the eruption of culture-based conflict are also found to be very scarce.

On the other hand, with the technological advancement, the skills demanded by current employers have changed drastically. Good writing and reading skills are no longer considered sufficient; instead of working as part of a team; managing oneself, speaking, listening, leading others, solving problems, and knowing how to learn etc. are the skills that are considered essential in today's working environment (Bridges, 1999). Several other studies have been conducted to look for the strategies that could create generic skills, particularly problem solving and conflict resolution skills in students and employees. There have also been organisational efforts for developing different models for resolution and tackling conflict at the workplace. In conflict management and its resolution mechanism, the dual concern models have evolved over the years.

There has been development in dual concern model of conflict resolution since originated in 1964. The original two-dimensional models were depicted by

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